

Addiction

What is addiction?

An addiction is a health disorder where you are unable to stop doing something that is causing harm to you or others.

The most common addictions are to alcohol, tobacco, drugs and gambling.

Addiction is often chronic, which means it goes on for a long time. It is also relapsing, meaning that you might go back to the addiction a few times on your path to recovery.

An addiction can take over your life, affecting your health, work, study, relationships and finances.

But addiction can be managed and you should expect to recover, even though it may take some time.

What types of addiction are there?

People can develop an addiction to:

- alcohol
- tobacco
- prescription drugs (for example codeine and other painkillers, sedatives, sleeping tablets)
- street drugs (for example heroin, marijuana, methamphetamine, cocaine)
- solvents (for example sniffing paint-thinners, petrol or glue)
- activities like gambling, shopping, computer games, exercise or eating.

Signs and symptoms of addiction

At the start, you might start to notice problems with close relationships and your moods.

As addiction gets worse you might:

- need more to get the same effect
- have withdrawal symptoms or feel sick if you stop
- sometimes use more than you mean to
- prioritise the addiction over other things
- keep going even though you know it is bad for you or others you care about
- try to cut down but can't.

If you are worried about yourself or someone you know, even if you aren't sure if the problem is 'an addiction', it's important to seek help.

Get help early

The sooner you recognise a problem and get help, the easier it will be to recover. Don't think that you have to hit rock bottom before seeing someone.

➔ Get advice and help

yourhealthinmind.org/first

How is addiction treated?

Addiction can be treated with:

“I was drinking to excess every night. I couldn't do anything without drinking. My family was freaking out, and even through the alcohol I was kind of freaking out too.”

- counselling (online, by telephone or in person)
- motivational interviewing and cognitive behaviour therapy (types of psychological treatment that encourage you to change your behaviour)
- medication
- group therapy (including support groups like Alcoholics Anonymous)
- family therapy
- detox programs in hospital or at home
- rehab in hospital or at home.

No single treatment will work for everyone first time. You can work with your doctor or other health professional to make a treatment plan that suits you.

Have a plan that is realistic, allows for the possibility of relapse and provides ongoing help for you and your family.

What can a psychiatrist do for addiction?

Psychiatrists play a crucial role in treating addiction.

A psychiatrist will recommend a treatment plan that fits with your situation.

They take into account:

- the way your mind works
- your physical health and the effect of drugs or alcohol on the body
- what's happening in your life – your job, money, housing, family, friends, level of supports or stress
- your cultural or language background.

A psychiatrist can provide treatment directly. They may also coordinate a range of other services to help you.

All psychiatrists are trained in the assessment and management of addiction.

Some psychiatrists have extra qualifications in addiction psychiatry or addiction medicine.

Recovery from addiction

Recovery is when you feel like you are back on track in your life, not just when you stop the addictive behaviour.

Most people do recover from addiction, although for some it takes a long time.

Relapse and addiction

Relapse is very common. Consider it a normal part of the recovery journey.

Stress is the most common reason for people to relapse. If you are recovering it's important to think through ways you might deal with stressful situations.

Remember

- ✓ Addiction is a health condition, not a lifestyle choice or weakness.
- ✓ Get help early. There are many options, from online counselling to inpatient rehab.
- ✓ Expect recovery. The majority of people who have an addiction will recover.
- ✓ Relapse is normal. Treatments work best when you expect to relapse and plan for it.

This fact sheet is also available online at yourhealthinmind.org

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Psychiatrists are doctors who specialise in mental health.

The Royal Australian and New Zealand College of Psychiatrists:

- trains and supports psychiatrists
- advocates for better mental health for our communities
- sets standards in psychiatry.



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This is a general guide only, and does not replace individual medical advice. Please speak to your doctor for advice about your situation. The RANZCP is not liable for any consequences arising from relying on this information. Subject matter experts, people with lived experience of mental illness and carers all contributed to this fact sheet.

Common questions about addiction

Isn't addiction a choice?

Addiction is not a choice or weakness. There may be an initial choice to, for example, have a bet on a horse or visit a casino. But once you develop an addiction, there are physical changes in the brain that affect how you cope with stress and make decisions.

“I've never met a patient who would choose to have an addiction.”

Dr Lisa Jukes, addiction psychiatrist

How does addiction affect the brain?

Repeated use of a drug changes the brain. These changes can affect your thinking, and increase the likelihood of making impulsive decisions. So even if you want to stop, you may find that you can't.

“Many people I see use alcohol, drugs or gambling to get them through the week.

Unfortunately, their regular use develops into an addiction over time, and now they must not only deal with their original problem, but also try and overcome their addiction.”

Prof. Dan Lubman, addiction psychiatrist

Do some people just have 'addictive personalities'?

Research has found that there isn't an 'addictive personality'. However, some people are more likely to develop an addiction because of their family history, stress or trauma in their life, or the way they have learnt to cope with difficult situations or emotions.

What is 'detox'?

Detox (detoxification), is when you stop using alcohol or a drug. Your body and brain have to get used to not having the drug in your system any more.

You might get withdrawal symptoms like cravings, nausea, diarrhoea, vomiting, aches and pains, anxiety, insomnia, agitation and mood swings.

If you need help to detox, you can be supported at home or admitted to a residential detox unit.

You will get help to cope with withdrawal symptoms and plan for your recovery.

Depending on the drug and how long and how much you have been using, withdrawal can last anywhere from 48 hours to a few weeks.

Detox is only the first step in recovering from addiction, and not a treatment in itself.

What is 'rehab'?

Rehab (short for rehabilitation) is an intensive period of treatment for addiction in a facility like a hospital. Out-patient and day programs are commonly available if you live in a city, and are a good way to do some intensive work without having to be admitted.

In rehab you will have professionals on hand to help with detox, psychotherapy (talking therapies) and medication.

Often you can also get practical help with finding stable housing or employment, facing court, training, education and socialising.

Rehab programs can last from 4 weeks to 12 months.

What else helps?

The support of your friends and family will help you to stay on track with your recovery.

You may also benefit from:

- a recovery coach (who could be a therapist, a sponsor or an addiction specialist)
- programs like Alcoholics Anonymous, Narcotics Anonymous and Gamblers Anonymous
- being part of a sporting club, community or religious group.